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COMMENTARY

More Degrowth Dogma

Kevin Carson | Support this author on Patreon | April 5th, 2025

here's a great deal of commonality in critiques of degrowth by left-wing "ecomodernists" and accelerationists like Leigh Philips (see my critique here), and right-wing libertarians like Steven Greenhut. Both are characterized by a high degree of conceptual laziness; this laziness is manifested particularly in a failure to clearly define what degrowth even is, instead playing on the negative

associations of the term and rolling out a series of talking points that don't honestly frame or directly address actual degrowth theory. Greenhut ("The 'Degrowth' Mentality Promises a World of Poverty and Misery," *Reason* October 25 — reprinted from *Orange County Register*) exemplifies these tendencies in spades.

Right at the outset, Greenhut summarizes degrowth as arguing that "humanity's

continuing pursuit of economic betterment is unsustainable and a threat to the planet." At the end of his piece he puts it, more crudely, as desiring a world in which we're "spending all day scrounging for food and washing our clothes with a rock."

Greenhut cites the website Degrowth.info to the effect that degrowth "requires radical redistribution, reduction in the material size of the global economy, and a shift in common

values towards care, solidarity, and autonomy." Naturally, he leaves out the part that calls for "a good life for all within planetary boundaries."

This, predictably, he dismisses as "the latest environmental-oriented take on the same-old left-wing totalitarianism" (here he links to an article on China's Great Leap Forward,

> as it would take immense government power to

radically redistribute resources and determine how to re-order society. However this concept would be implemented, it certainly would enslave and impoverish virtually everyone, and lead to famine and misery.

. . . One might argue that progressive policy makers in California are engaged in a kinder, gentler version as they crush the oil and gas

> industry and try to remake our economy and rejigger land-use patterns to promote a “sustainable” and carbon-free future.

It’s ironic that Greenhut trots out the Great Leap Forward as an analogy, as it was motivated not by an agenda of austerity but as a way of drastically expanding industrial output.

More substantively, the claims quoted above involve no small

amount of strawmanning, not to say projection. He ignores the extent to which the history of actual, real-world capitalism — as opposed to the ahistorical fairy tale regularly defended at *Reason* — was established through the use of immense government power to radically redistribute resources and re-order society. The creation of the wage system, based on the separation of a propertyless working class from means of

production concentrated in the hands of absentee owners, involved not only the wholesale nullification of peasants' customary communal rights in the land from the late Middle Ages on, but vagrancy laws that imposed whippings, ear-croppings and peonage on newly landless peasants who would not accept work from landowners on whatever terms were offered.

In fact it is the current

concentration of wealth, and the level of resource consumption and waste in the economy, which depend on government intervention. It's frequently joked that governments of settler states like the United States and Canada are actually a number of mining and oil companies in a trench coat. One of the primary functions of Western colonialism was to expropriate and enclose the natural resources of colonized

countries; the central function of the neoliberal order in the post-colonial world has been to force countries of the Global South into export-oriented development models in which their primary export is natural resources to the West, on terms set by the latter. From the very beginning, capitalism's growth model has been based on the extensive addition of artificially abundant resource inputs.

The reference to fossil fuels and

land use patterns, in particular, is a masterful display of question-begging. In the real world, the only thing needed to “crush” the fossil fuel industry would be to eliminate the use of eminent domain for pipelines, along with statutory liability caps for oil spills, and open up the industry to full civil liability for *all* the negative externalities it causes.

The primary actor behind *existing* car-centered land use patterns was the state: massive

subsidies (including the use of eminent domain to bulldoze entire neighborhoods) to urban freeway systems, the imposition of monoculture development and low-density development via zoning laws and urban design plattes, and the subsidy of outlying developments by making older, inlying compact developments pay a disproportionate share of extending roads and utilities to them.

As for “restructuring society,” the pattern of development of American industrial capitalism from the late 19th through mid-20th century was largely owing to state policy. Absent railroad, civil aviation, and highway systems created largely at government expense, and the use of patents for concentrating and cartelizing industry, the 20th century model of high-overhead, centralized mass production would likely never have come

about. Instead we'd have most likely had an industrial development model based on dozens or hundreds of local manufacturing economies on the model of the Emilia-Romagna industrial district: low-overhead production, using general purpose electrical machinery, frequently switching between product lines on a demand-pull basis.

Greenhut shows a fundamental conceptual blinder, in presenting

the issue as one between "market-based economies" and "command-and-control" economies: Market-based economies create incentives that unleash human creativity and provide incredible abundance. Command-and-control economies, whether run by warlords or technocratic planners, result in shortages and poverty.

It's entirely wrong-headed to equate the idea of a "market-

based economy," as such, with the actual model of globalized corporate capitalism we live under. In fact the idea of a "market-based economy," as such, is meaningless. A market-based economy is simply one that allows the formation of market-clearing prices without interference; it's compatible with any number of alternative sets of property rules. And the basic structure of the global corporate economy is built on a foundation

of state power. Transnational corporations depend on massively subsidized utility and transportation infrastructures, and other subsidized inputs, along with the use of intellectual property to enclose outsourced production by nominally independent contractors within corporate walls. It's maximalist intellectual property accords that enable Western capital to outsource most or all actual production to contractors in

Asia, pay the sweatshops a tiny pittance for the goods they produce, but maintain a legal monopoly over disposal of the product so they can mark up the price many hundreds of percent on the shelves of retailers.

But he falls victim to an even greater conceptual failing — the failure, mentioned earlier, to clearly define “growth” and “degrowth” at all. For example:

> Economically growing

> societies can best deal with environmental problems because they have excess resources to spend on environmental improvement. Growing and free societies spawn new technologies that are effective at reducing emissions. It's no surprise communist nations were the world's biggest polluters.

Ironically, Marxist-Leninist countries in the 20th century engaged in large-scale waste

and pollution for the same reason as Western capitalist countries: their shared understanding of “growth.” The marginal productivity theory of John Bates Clark treated the ability to charge for something, as such, as the creation of value. Both national GDP accounting and GAAP corporate management accounting, similarly, treat the consumption of resources as the creation of value. And since resource inputs

are subsidized and negative externalities are insulated from negative consequences to the guilty firm, there is reduced incentive to minimize waste or pollution. The Soviet planning agency Gosplan, likewise, treated the consumption of resources to produce a quota of output assigned in the Plan as the creation of value, regardless of whether the finished goods were anything anyone wanted or whether they even worked. And

since the state planners assigned no price to negative externalities, in the interest of maximizing output, there was even less incentive to avoid pollution than in the West.

And the structure of the mass-production economy created further incentives for waste and inefficiency. Because of its reliance on expensive, product-specific machinery, American industry carried a high burden of overhead and had a strong

incentive to maximize output in order to minimize unit costs. That meant enormous amounts of waste production (the military-industrial complex, subsidized sprawl and car culture, etc.) and planned obsolescence to keep the wheels turning.

This is where a proper understanding of both growth and degrowth comes in. Greenhut relies heavily on two pieces on degrowth — one at

Vox and one at the World Economic Forum. He quotes both quite selectively, leaving out a great deal of nuance and clarification, giving an extremely dishonest impression. To the extent that he acknowledges defenses of degrowth by writers like Jason Hickel at all, he simply tips his hat to them as briefly as possible and then accuses them of “sanewashing” the strawman views he falsely attributes to them.

Both the pieces Greenhut quotes have the virtue of at least attempting to honestly restate actual degrowth arguments — although they repeatedly fall back into equally honest confusion based on their equation of “growth” to standard of living, “degrowth” to austerity, and GDP to prosperity. They repeatedly quote statements, like that of Hickel (cited in the WEF article), that degrowth is not about austerity as such, but

about “reducing [energy and resource] throughput.”

The Vox article quotes Hickel at greater length:

> If our washing machines, fridges, and phones lasted twice as long, we would consume half as many (thus the output of those industries would decline), but with zero reduction in our access to those goods. .
>
> . .

> . . . [T]he language of poverty really gets it wrong: longer-lasting products, living wages, shorter working weeks, better access to public services and affordable housing — we are calling for the *opposite* of poverty. Yes, industries like SUVs and fast fashion would decline, but that doesn't mean poverty. We can replace them with public transportation and

> longer-lasting fashion, thus meeting everyone's needs.

This is key. The focus on "reducing production" is meaningless, unless we take into account how much of what is produced is actually waste and negative utility. A huge part of GDP is taken up by things like the military-industrial complex, police, and prisons. Subsidized Interstate highways make it artificially cheap to ship things over large market areas that

otherwise would be more economically produced for local consumption. Subsidized sprawl and car culture generate artificial distance between things, create artificial dependency on cars, and crowd out convenient public transit. Planned obsolescence is ubiquitous, with products deliberately designed to thwart repair and long life. Major parts of the economy are taken up by "bullshit jobs."

And much if not most of this

waste could be eliminated, not by regulating it out of existence, but by removing subsidies and liability protections so that the price of resource consumption reflects its actual cost, and eliminating the intellectual property supports to planned obsolescence.

In the absence of legally enforced artificial scarcities, like intellectual property, that prevent the savings from more efficient resource use and more

ephemeral product design and production methods from being passed on to the consumer, implosion of GDP would be the natural effect of increased efficiencies. It's artificial scarcity — as Tom Peters once crowed, the price of his new camera was mostly "intellect" rather than labor and materials — that prevents standard of living being decoupled from GDP.

There is room for honest debate about whether an end to

subsidized resource consumption and waste will reduce our ecological footprint sufficiently to achieve the necessary reductions in environmental damage. But let's have an honest one — not talking points like "turning back the clock on the myriad advancements that have extended and improved our lives," and otherwise preaching to the choir in venues like the *OC Register*.

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